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Jesuit Pope

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Jesuit Pope

Many of us were surprised that the new pope would be a Jesuit. It is an amusing turn of history, since the Jesuits have a special vow to accept any assignment that the pope might give us. And now a Jesuit is pope.

Rather than speculate on what might transpire in the coming days and months with Pope Francis and the Jesuits, I wish to reflect on Ignatius' insight in relation to the kind of obedience that any of us might experience in our lives, in situations that involve legitimate authority.

At the time that Ignatius and the early Jesuits made the decision to entrust their very lives to the decisions of the pope with regard to serving anywhere in the world he might choose to send them, the person who was pope at that time did not have a reputation for holiness. But he was the one person who held responsibility for the whole Church. Ignatius and those first Jesuits all trusted that God would work for their good and that of the People of God through whatever human being might be in charge of the Church, but also through the many people who exercise ordinary positions of authority that all of us encounter in our lives.

Ignatius wrote in the Jesuit Constitutions that all should obey the person legitimately in charge as though they were obeying God: a radical statement of trust that God would work in and through imperfect humans and human organizations. It might seem like an abdication of personal responsibility and a loss of freedom to obey another person whom we might consider as ill-fitted for his or her position. But, choosing to trust God to work in and through other humans, has some mature and freeing aspects for those who can see it.

Most of us can recall one or more examples from our lives where we spent a great amount of energy trying to either obtain or avoid a job or position, or to win or avoid someone's attention. And in our striving, lots of anxious moments, fears about not being able to have things our way, and perhaps frustration at not having control. Contrast that kind of experience with another sort, when we trusted someone to make a decision that we would follow, whether it would be pleasant or not, believing that it would be the right thing to do. How little energy is wasted in negative feelings when we find it in ourselves to trust another person to "make the call" that we follow as best we can.

I learned the hard way, as many of us do, by anxiously, with stomach-churning thoughts, sought to bring, perhaps manipulate, other people to my way of thinking so that I could achieve my intentions. It was exhausting

work, anything but spiritual, as I was only thinking about what I thought I needed in order to be happy. After failing, I had to either repeat the futile process, or explore another way of proceeding.

A fairly straightforward question occurred to me: Would God be with me and for me in meeting my real needs if I ceased to try to control everyone and everything? When I came to the gift of trust (for it was not of my creation), and could affirm that God indeed would work through “mere” humans other than myself (thereby relieving me of the formerly assumed role of being God), the rest was, if not easy, at least free of all the stress and strain of acting as though I somehow had to arrange all people and circumstances around me.

The Jesuit pope and I (with most people of faith) have this in common: we believe that God ordinarily works for our welfare through fallible human beings in legitimate positions of authority. Even a pope ordinarily has to obey a doctor or a police official. Any of us can obey out of fear, or out of trust – in God.